SHOPPING CENTER IDOLATRY
Luke 16:1-15
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In the second act of Tenessee Williams' play, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, the wise family patriarch, known affectionately as Big Daddy, makes the following intriguing observation, "The human animal is a beast that dies and if he's got money he buys and buys and buys and I think the reason he buys everything he can is that in the back of his mind he has the crazy hope that one of his purchases will be everlasting! Which it never can be..." (Act II, p.86-87; cited by Bill J. Vanos; The Life that Listens,p.107).

Our most serious business in life, it seems, is building permanence, seeking security, constructing a fortress against threats to life. It is a task we begin quite early. It is a task that is never complete. Sometimes it takes on the appearance of an attempt to deny our mortality. To that situation Jesus said one time, "A man cannot serve two masters...You cannot serve God and mammon," or "money" as the New English Bible bluntly but accurately translates.

But first He told a very curious story. William Barclay calls it as bold and challenging a parable as He ever told. Others have called it obscure, confusing, morally questionable, perhaps incomplete. It is about a man who is either irresponsible, lazy or incompetent and who, when confronted by the inevitability of a final accounting, feathers his nest by persuading his employer's debtors to join him in a conspiracy of fraud and forgery. One by one he calls them into his office, takes out their account and instructs them to reduce the amount they owe his employer, which they do, cheerfully, gratefully. The amounts are not trivial: the first client, for instance, is into the owner for one hundred measures of oil which is the equivalent of 875 gallons. Before he's done his clients are not only in his debt, they very well may be blackmailed. The man is an utter scoundrel, albeit a very clever one, perhaps even a charming one.

As if the story were not unlikely enough, what comes next was, and still is, shocking. The owner of the business discovered what his steward had done. But instead of firing him, or having him arrested, he congratulated him for his "shrewdness". Perhaps it was the first bit of creativity and initiative he had ever seen in his employee. Perhaps he thought the man could be more useful now that he had discovered how resourceful he could be. Whatever the rationale, we are left with an almost embarrassing hero on our hands.

Some New Testament scholars believe that something important must be missing from the text; another line or two, or something more about the situation which would shed light on the story if we knew it. Be that as it may, Jesus himself, summarizes by suggesting that no one can serve, ultimately and faithfully, two masters. Whatever else may be said about the man in the story, he did pay attention to his ultimate security. He knew on which side of the bread the butter was. So, Jesus is saying, the most important matter for all of us is our relationship with God, our security, our salvation. He was, I believe, terribly realistic about the human condition. With consistency He appealed to enlightened self-interest. Our life long obsession is our insecurity. He proposed a way to resolve it...by single-minded devotion to God. We can't, in fact, have it both ways. We can't look to God for our security, but also somewhere else as well. It doesn't work. In point of fact, it comes close to the Biblical diagnosis of our fundamental problem; namely, idolatry. From beginning to end people in the Bible are looking somewhere else for their security. God offers it, but His people try to find it with Golden Calfs, military alliances, material wealth, political power, prestige, physical prowess. The jealousy of God for our total commitment is a very practical arrangement, as a matter of fact. The trouble is all these schemes not only don't work, they tend

to stand in the place of the only thing that does work - God and His eternal love.

The man may have been a scoundrel, but at least he had his priorities in order. The Biblical witness suggests that therein lies a clue to our condition and our salvation.

Assume for a moment that there is something more deeply wrong with human beings than a propensity to dishonesty, violence, unfaithfulness and selfishness. Assume that the hurtful things people do are symptomatic of a condition most people never really understand. The late Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the leading Christian thinkers of the last generation, diagnosed our condition in terms which I think are helpful. Niebuhr taught that our problem begins with the fact that, alone in creation, human beings know that life doesn't go on forever. We know our mortality. We don't like what we know about ourselves, not one little bit. We worry about it - a lot. It is the source of anxiety, dread, the "angst" celebrated by philosophy, psychiatry and Linus, who clutches his blanket against its threat. And so, Niebuhr continued, we behave in ways calculated to reduce the pain of anxiety which means, sooner or later, denying mortality. Human beings, he taught, are so desperately anxious about the limits of their humanity they will give heart, mind, and body to anything which remotely suggests ultimate security.

The motion picture "10" is the best of many funny but ultimately sad portrayals of middle-aged men making fools of themselves by desperately clinging to life, trying vainly to stop time and mortality, through an affair with a younger woman. That's not new, of course. Read the story of King David again sometime, from the point of view of Passages; middle-aged monarch, his major triumphs behind him, staying home one year when his armies took to the field in the spring and falling into an affair with a younger Bathsheba.

University of Chicago theologian Langdon Gilkey writes, "Anxiety about the future drives the self to secure itself..." (Message and Existence, p.140). "Thus we seek material security not only against the immediate perils to life such as hunger and cold, we seek also the power to guarantee, for the almost infinite future the job or the status that gives us security...our search takes on the strange character of infinity." (Naming the Whirlwind, p.322).

That's the Biblical - Theological diagnosis, similar to, but not as simple as, Big Daddy's observation, "he has the crazy hope that one of his purchases will be everlasting." The problem is idolatry. Our security is in God's hands. But we don't trust that. We try to guarantee it. Mammon becomes God.

Just as we're looking about for our ultimate security we bump into the particular overarching characteristic of our culture; consumerism, fed by socially accepted selfishness; the new narcissism , the now generation, greediness celebrated as self-affirmation. All the component parts for contemporary idolatry are in place. The dollar has become the deity: it is indeed, finally Almighty, full of infinite potential and hope, capable of guaranteeing security. The catalog is the new scripture, published in many translations and Revised Standard Version at different levels of sophistication from Sears to Saks Fifth Avenue. The new Temple, the place where the faith is celebrated and practiced, the place for fellowship, recreation as well as religion,is the shopping mall. People talk about shopping centers as if they were cathedrals. Complete with beautiful fountains, multiple-use public areas - some with pews - circular stairways, balconies, meditation rooms, restaurants, shopping centers absorb more creative architectural energy than concert halls and art museums. People are proud of shopping centers. A trip there is interesting, exciting and full of promise.

Consumerism, may I suggest, is a serious religion. It allows wants to become needs so quickly we don't ever know it's happening to us. It seduces us into really believing that things will make us happy. A New York Times interviewer asked Robert Redford about the values of the people who lived in the Chicago suburb where he filmed "Ordinary People". He said: "These people are into money. How to get it and what it will provide."

A recent best seller, Michael Korba's Success! How Every Man and Woman can Achieve It, is an unvarnished apologia for greed. It is not peripheral literature. It was a best seller. Korba is dazzled by the world of expensive things and advises the cultivation of expensive tastes as the pre-requisite for success. "Appearances are nearly everything. He provides diagrams on how to sit at a meeting, how a suit coat ought to fit, how to use cigarette or glasses for rhetorical flourish..." Telephones, their kind, number and color are a powerful weapon...The more people you can keep on hold the more successful you will seem. You cannot have too many buttons, according to Mr. Korba. Successful people trust no one, understanding that one's real enemies are in one's own corporation. Values are excess baggage. And the reward for all this? Money...or in Mr. Korba's best selling imagery, the possibility of one day, dressed exquisitely, looking out over Manhattan from your office, or being trundled about in the sweet warm dark of a limousine while the others wait for busses in the rain. (See Harpers, October 1980, The Virtues of Ambition, Joseph Epstein, p.53ff).

It's not that Christians are other worldly. It's not that the Gospel opposes ownership, or enjoying the good things of life. It's just that idolatry doesn't work. It never has. That's a tragic misunderstanding of what Jesus taught. It doesn't provide peace, happiness and well-being. In fact, all it really is good at producing is worry. If your job is the most important thing in the world to you, you're going to worry a lot about it. If it's your house, your automobile, your position in the community, your sex life, your children, your vacation - you're probably worrying a lot. You probably spend a lot of time worrying about the possibility of losing these things. Yale Chaplain John Vannorsdall said recently, "...to be saved from worry by the power of God means that, as a matter of fact, God becomes your only God: all the other things take a lesser place and require less worry." (The Lutheran Series on the Protestant Pulpit, 3/9/80).

The trouble with idolatry is that it doesn't work. If you try to squeeze something infinite out of something finite, you will not only be unsatisfied, you will very likely squeeze the life out as well. If you depend on your children for your salvation, your peace and happiness, the load will be too heavy for that relationship to bear. If your ego strength depends on their succeeding athletically or academically or economically or socially, they are being done grave injustice. It won't work. If your happiness is tied to your house or your car, you're in trouble indeed. Most tragic of all, if you're looking to economics for your security and salvation, you probably aren't ever going to enjoy what you already have very much.

The truth of the matter is that you only really enjoy what you don't ultimately need. Psychologists know that a marriage based on the terrible need of one person for another, will not be a healthy marriage. The truth is that children are far better off when parents don't need them for identity or ego purposes. And they are far more enjoyable. The truth is that you can't enjoy something if you load it up with expectations and demands, and insist that it reward you. You can't enjoy anything that exerts that kind of power over you. You can't enjoy your sexuality if you look to it to guarantee your youth or masculinity or femininity. You won't enjoy friendship or romantic love or family affection if you need it to prove anything to yourself.

Idolatry not only doesn't work, it keeps looking like hell or slavery or both. Michael Korba gave me a whole new definition of hell with this broadside: "Everyone around you is suspect. Those above suppress, those below cut you down. The true test of success is the degree you can isolate yourself from others." (Op.cit., p.53).

Jesus realized that you can't serve God and mammon. Human salvation lies in being in relationship with God and one's brothers and sisters. It is a matter of grace and love, faithfulness, forgiveness. It is a matter of compassion and honesty and justice. To have new life is to receive it as a gift and to live, in joy and gratitude to the giver. The remedy for idolatry is simply to let God be your only God.

A starting place might be to acknowledge our idolatry, to give it a name and confess our wrong-headed commitment to it. A starting place might be to acknowledge how, in subtle ways, we have elevated wants into needs, luxuries into necessities until we have lost sight of our authentic needs.

Jesus realized and taught that in order to be saved we need to be liberated from selfishness; that we need God in order to be free and totally human. We don't have to give everything away. He prescribed that one time for one man who, I suspect, was squeezing his posessions too tightly. What we need to do is clear out the center of our lives and allow God his place.

He has decided to love us. He has decided to give us life and the capacity for joy and laughter and peace and ecstacy. He has given generously - and on top of all His giving He has come among us in Jesus Christ to invite us to that fullness of life which is salvation. And after all His deciding He has left one decision to us : the big one: the only really important one...Who will be our God?

Amen.

God eternal, save us from the dishonesty of idolatry. Judge us when we kneel before other altars. Forgive us when we make unfair demands on people who love us. Be our God, and show us how to be Your faithful people. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.